ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE
for the
Reservoir Creek Beaver Transplant
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 3, Bozeman
July 2018

Proposed Action and Need

The enclosed Decision Notice has been prepared for the proposed transplant of beaver into Reservoir Creek.

The project would restore a native species to suitable habitat in Reservoir Creek. The Bannack Grazing Association and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) are seeking the habitat benefit that beavers provide on the landscape including: reduced peak runoff, increased stream channel complexity, and a higher water table. The Association accepts that beaver may disrupt irrigation infrastructure on the property in favor of the passive and cost-effective restoration that beaver will bring to the system over time. Beaver dam analogues and slash piles would be constructed at release sites with available dead aspen to try to overcome predation risk to transplanted beaver and increase the chances of a successful transplant. The analogue dams would provide a deep pool, and slash would provide hiding cover in the short term. Transplant stock would be obtained from the Grasshopper or Warm Springs Creek drainages in cooperation with landowners, trappers, and Bannack State Park. Prior to release, beaver would be subject to a health inspection by the FWP Veterinarian. FWP recognizes that beaver can damage important infrastructure through flooding and is prepared to provide mitigation measures to minimize impacts from the release. Two culverts on Reservoir Creek Road would be inspected and fitted with structures designed to minimize flooding and road hazards, as necessary.

Public Process and Comments

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environments. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on June 1, 2018. The public was notified that the EA was available for review and comment as follows:

- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners, Beaverhead County, BLM, DNRC Forest Service and other interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.
- Two public notices each in *The Montana Standard* and *Dillon Tribune*.
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife and Parks web page: fwp.mt.gov

Copies of the draft EA were available for public review at FWP Region 3 Headquarters in Bozeman and the Butte Area Resource Office. Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 29 days (through June 22, 2018).

A total of 60 individuals, 5 organizations and 2 agencies commented on the proposed beaver transplant. One individual was opposed to the beaver transplant outright and several suggestions to improve the operation were made in other comments. FWP's response to comments are in **bold** in Table 1.

FWP thanks all parties that took time to provide comments to the proposal.

Table 1. Summary of comments received on the Reservoir Creek Beaver Transplant proposal.

PARTY	FROM	SUPPORT OR OPPOSE	COMMENTS
Individual	Dillon	Oppose	Water gets real low in fall. There are no willows for a few miles on lower part of creek. Beaver will wipe out aspen, a species I thought you were trying to protect. What are the impacts to West Slope cutthroat trout? Hunters may fish them out. Beaver would reestablish from Grasshopper Creek if the habitat was suitable. **FWP response: FWP recognizes that the lower end of Reservoir Creek is a losing reach and does not flow, outside of peak spring runoff, to Grasshopper Creek. If successful, FWP believes beaver will moderate peak flows and store water, both in beaver ponds and an expanded floodplain, in the upper reaches of Reservoir Creek. FWP maintains that 2.1 miles of dry Reservoir Creek channel plus another 3.8 miles without suitable habitat (willow) makes it unlikely that beaver would colonize Reservoir Creek. Beaver will utilize aspen and, in some cases, diminish it on a local level. When this occurs, it becomes inefficient for beaver to utilize these areas and they move on to more suitable habitat and the aspen will prosper in the sediment rich soils impounded by beaver. Current West Slope harvest regulations include one daily and in possession and FWP does not believe that harvest will be a limiting factor in Reservoir Creek. FWP believes the project will have a net benefit for West Slope cutthroat trout by providing deep pools for overwintering habitat.**
Agency	Dillon	Support	The culvert in Section 18, T8S, R12W has been identified for replacement and/or upgrade. The BLM rated reach 1594 as Functional-At Risk (Static) with excess sediment delivery from upstream sources being a casual factor. **FWP response: An upgrade to the existing 48 inch culvert will alleviate most concerns**

			regarding a beaver dam blockage and subsequent road damage from flooding at this site. In the interim, FWP will install a structure to ensure that the road does not flood. Further investigation of the culvert on USFS property west of the Association supports no action needed at this site due to the steep grade of the creek.
3 Organizations 2 Individuals	Helena Hamilton Missoula Condon Unknown	Support	A suggestion that a temporary closure to beaver trapping is necessary to ensure the success of the transplant was made in several comments. **FWP response: FWP stands by the original decision to not implement a temporary closure to beaver trapping in Reservoir Creek. We base this decision on the original analysis plus the timing of this decision and the furbearer regulation setting process, which is almost complete for 2018. Should conditions change, we would be happy to revisit this decision during the next furbearer season setting process. FWP will also communicate with any trappers that apply for the DNRC sections in Reservoir Creek and inform them of the state of the project and our desire to see a well- established population.**
Individual	Condon	Support	Seek out nuisance beaver that would otherwise be lethally trapped for the transplant. Catch and relocate beavers as family units to maintain social structure. Water temperature effects as noted in Section 3a may be overstated as beaver increase surface-groundwater exchange which moderate temperatures and benefit coldwater fish species. I would expect potentially significant beneficial changes to the diversity and abundance of game and nongame. **FWP response: FWP will work with local trappers to obtain beaver in nuisance situations. We will look to capture family units to the greatest extent possible and will release family units at the same site. Two separate release locations are identified to accommodate beaver from different family groups. Water temperature effects are noted,**

			and FWP maintains that temperature will not be a significant issue in the high elevation and cold climate found in Reservoir Creek. FWP share the sentiment that the benefits to diversity and abundance of game and nongame are significant.
56 Individuals	16 Montana Communities & Casper, WY	Support	Fifty-seven letters or emails of support without management suggestions or comments were received. Letters were supportive of both FWP and Bannack Grazing Association efforts to restore beaver to Reservoir Creek. FWP response: Comment noted.

Final Environmental Assessment

The draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment, it is my decision to approve the proposed action to transplant beaver into Bannack Grazing Association property in Reservoir Creek, pending Fish and Wildlife Commission approval.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

Mark Deleray
Region 3 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

6/26/18
Date